# WHEN THEATRE WILL BECOME FULLY ITSELF:

## Digital Supratheatre And The Fight For An Inclusive Future

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Hi there! Welcome to the techno-magical realm where decolonization of cultural and Eurocentric knowledge happens. Today, we'll take a trip into an alternate future of theatre. I am Kali Cyberwitch and I'll be your guide.

You might be wondering who I am. I am a theatre fortune-teller and member of Giuvlipen, a Roma theatre collective from Romania. We are a cyber-sorcery-sorority with a minority centrist take. Our paramount goal is the hacking of the racist patriarchal system that is currently seizing power structures in the world of art and theatre.

You shall now be introduced to the concept of a theatre of the future, namely digital supratheatre. This new theatrical practice has two underlying principles: technological change and social change.

Digital supratheatre works based on the principles laid out in the Roma Futurism Manifesto, reclaiming magical thinking and sorcery as tools for fighting the system. Throughout the long history of Roma oppression, since society has continued to leave us completely unarmed in the face of systemic racism, conjuring the magical and the supernatural has been our only weapon.

In our theatre collective, comprised exclusively of Roma actresses, we often feel like witches deploying theatre scripts as spells and incantations. What for? For altering a theatrical milieu dominated by Eurocentrism, ignorance, and, mostly, the refusal of white artists to renounce some of the privileges and power that hold non-white professionals down into precarity.

Along with the reclaiming of sorcery, another one of our cyber-sorority's main goals is the recouping of technology on behalf of Roma who lack access to modern tech resources. We included this goal in our manifesto and also coined a term for it: techno-sorcery. Techno-sorcery is the marriage between technology and magic, which cyberwitches deploy for the creation of an egalitarian and democratic world. The new reality of a worldwide pandemic has generally pushed communities of non-white artists into ever more vulnerable places, at the same time as, for our Roma theatre collective in particular, has made it impossible to perform in live shows. This is how the two principles of digital supratheatre came to be.

We define digital supratheatre as an artistic practice that goes beyond the

traditional forms of theatre as we knew and applied it before the pandemic. Our current vision is of a new artistic *potion* that works beyond the limitations of "filmed theatre"—aspiring not to becoming film but its own form of art.

Digital supratheatre is not some sort of a theatre-movie hybrid. The incorporation of digital technology as key element in the process of artistic creation poises supratheatre above theatre practice and beyond cinema. We prefer to ascribe supratheatre under the umbrella of "new media art."

Just like it happened for digital art and electronic music, we expect supratheatre to be contested by conservative cultural figures—the ones who oppose technological as well as social change, turning a blind eye to the fact that throughout history theatre has always found a way to reinvent itself and adapt to new human realities.

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In the past, theatre's reinvention happened alongside technological development. In the future, theatre will incorporate and assimilate technology as one of its defining elements, thus turning into digital supratheatre. In digital supratheatre, technology will not replace but enhance the actor's gestuality, voice, diction, body language, and craft on the whole, with the end goal of technocatharsis amid the audience.

In digital supratheatre, we'll create immersive emotional experiences and rely on their magical, transformative power to challenge a collective mindset habituated to artistic products steeped in Eurocentric ideas. We'll *infect* the perpetration of European cultural colonialism with our occult malware. We'll *shut down* a system of ideas that impose the superiority of Western culture and civilization against Indigenous or minoritarian ones, and ones that also minimize the contribution, expertise, and knowledge of non-Westerners. We are the future of theatre and we'll make sure that cultural pluralism will put an end to the dark age of Western cultural supremacy. We'll invoke the internet as a collective spirit to serve our mission of digital justice—i.e. turning the online world into a safe space for those of us who are subjected to the replication of violence we receive in real life on the web.

Furthermore, we oppose and fight the way in which the failure to understand the

internet's basic functions has allowed for violence towards people of color to become a product for mass consumption. This monetization of suffering is a consequence of late capitalism. It has led to the commodification of Black death and turned human life into marketable material.

A good case in point is a seminal event from 2020: the killing of George Floyd. The live video of his death took the world by storm. The internet placed the execution of a man of color at our fingertips, made us privy to it. It was an erroneously curated spectacle, an act of mass consumption that dehumanized Afro-Americans and normalized acts of violence targeted against them, making it look as if their lives are of very small value. But when images of violence start touring the internet and television, one of the outcomes is the retraumatization of the audience of color, while also risking to desensitize the public and banalize hate crimes to the point where they become acceptable, something happening so frequently that it becomes ordinary.

On the other hand, what with the popularization of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement fueled by Floyd's case, we couldn't help but notice the reactions of artists in our theatrical milieu. Eastern Europe is subject to cultural colonialism coming from Western Europe and the United States, so it wasn't long before politico-cultural debates around BLM took up here too. And a lot of theatremakers in Romania were turned indignant by the BLM's "attacks" on Western culture and civilization.

For instance, Eurocentrists viewed the act of removing statues of historical racist figures—leaders of the Confederate States, colonialists like Christopher Columbus or King Leopold II of Belgium, the man responsible of the Congo genocide—as vandalism and an ambush on all the cultural hallmarks of white supremacy.

Another case in point, amid the same BLM protests backdrop, was HBO Max's decision to temporarily remove *Gone With the Wind* from their catalogue. The company later restored and recontextualized the work, by adding a disclaimer that introduces it in terms of an artistic product loaded with "ethnic and racial prejudices" that "were wrong then and are wrong today." Similar decisions, from a few other streaming platforms, such as Netflix and Disney+, ensued. The opponents of political correctness took these revisions for artistic censorship and a ban against freedom of expression in art.

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Romanian actors and directors who were expressing concern all over social media over art censorship were in fact crusading for the perpetration of a racist language in both society and art. I documented a bunch of opinions that disseminated through Facebook in response to the "new changes." Some of them used seemingly candid yet racist jokes as decoy: "Political correctness will now put a ban on brownies, dark chocolate, and gypsy ham"; "As a sign of protest, from now on I'll only be wearing black T-shirts"; and: "Is bleaching your clothes racism?"

I called out Romanian theatremakers and their urge to mock Roma people or people of color, to dehumanize them by equating them to dishes of food or to black clothes, for what it was: a public pledge of allegiance to racism.

Ironically, while their racist "jokes" proliferated across news feeds, my Facebook account was blocked for thirty days on account of having shared a photo from the BLM protests in the United States captioned: "Revolution now! burn down the white supremacy institutions." My call for social justice was supposedly not in accordance with Facebook's community standards of hate speech, making my temporary removal seem only logical for the platform's admins.

As word about BLM protests got around the whole wide world, in Romania there were theatremakers, amongst others, who also chose to view the fight for human rights as violence. For example, Romanian French playwright Matei Vișniec penned an [op-ed where he drew a comparison between anti-racism and the COVID virus](). "Just like the coronavirus," Vișniec wrote, "the identitarian anti-racist movement is blind, it expands fast, triggers stupor and mimetical reactions and sometimes numbs the collective and individual intelligence." Vișniec also used his widely popular column to propagate the idea of an alleged "minorities dictatorship."

The right-wing discourse seizing power within artistic communities, deploying arts to incite their audience to prejudice and hatred, is a dangerous act every time, everywhere. But it's even more so when happening in a country like Romania. Here, famed theatre figures openly object notions of social equality in a national climate defined by five hundred years of Roma slavery, conservatism, stark social

injustice, and inequality.

This is the status-quo that compelled us, theatre cyber-witches, to formulate a direct response against the establishment's current discourse by initiating our digital supratheatre movement and openly undertaking a leftist perspective. The future of theatre has to be different.

In the future of theatre, telling racist jokes is synonymous to saying "Macbeth." It's bad omen. It sets the theatre house on fire. It tears it down.

In the future of theatre, all people sharing a theatre house's roof will understand and respect personal boundaries. Managers of theatre companies will pen professional codes that are genuinely ethical, emancipatory, and committed to preventing abuses of any kind. Sexual harassment will not be gingerly validated through regulations such as the following, imposed by theatre director Alvis Hermanis: "In our theatre, flirts and flings are permitted between actors, as well as actors and the audience and any other combinations." This rule is, to the present day, part of an "ethical code" for the employees, collaborators, and spectators of the New Riga Theatre. In the #MeToo epoch, a failure to recognize the long history of sexism experienced by actresses and female theatre workers can undermine a crucial act of social and cultural justice. We therefore dissent with the official permission given to theatre "flirts and flings" in situations lacking a pivotal element: consent.

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The future of theatre has to be inhabited by actresses who are asked for their consent. By actresses who are not obligated to play formulaic or ridiculous feminine roles that reinforce the patriarchy. By transgender actresses interpreting parts ranging from Shakespeare's Juliet to characters directly inspired from their own experiences and personal stories.

In this theatre, resources are equally distributed between different ethnic artistic communities.

Just like for *Gone With the Wind*, the future of theatre accommodates revisions of works of art. The future of theatre is mindful of the fact that invoking arguments such as "aesthetic autonomy" in opposition to recontextualization is essentially the

depoliticization of art—a failure to admit all art is political. Aesthetics is political, and "talent" and "quality" are subjective, a standard that has been set by the holders of power and the makers of rules.

If social relevance is theatre's mission, then theatre should be made of something more than mere aesthetics.

The theatre of the future leaves room for experimentation and reinvention, as well as for an openly political stance. The work of the political artist will not be policed by conservative figures, will be deemed no less than their "high-art theatre." The social dimension of theatre won't be just marginally tolerated but will *define* the craft one day.

Digital supratheatre accommodates those from vulnerable groups. Those who are part of independent artistic companies, who, because of resources being unequally distributed, don't have a physical space to call "theatre"—though for them "theatre" is much more than a mere building, anyway.

In digital supratheatre, Eurocentrism is replaced by a diversity of voices that can coexist alongside each other: there will be no need to establish hierarchies but, rather, everyone will adhere to a multitude of perspectives that expand the meaning of "theatre."

In the future of theatre, freedom of expression is not conflated with hate speech. Theatre artists will get political education classes so they'll be able to tell censorship from respectful behavior and language towards individuals from discriminated groups.

As writer and activist James Baldwin beautifully said: "We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist." By the same token, theatre will turn into a safe space for all artists and spectators alike.

In the theatre of the future, our lives and bodies are not reduced to the pressure of productivity, to the number of tickets we sell. The theatre of the future welcomes all spectators for whom art has long been an inaccessible luxury.

The theatre of the future fights climate change. As data storage technologies become ever more popular and their carbon footprint increasingly impacts climate, digital supratheatre will turn instead to renewable energy. Theatremakers

embedding technologies into their productions will use ecologically sustainable ones.

In the theatre of the future, planet Earth feels at ease and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions is a serious issue.

The future of theatre is about magical cyber-sororities and everything they entail: ritual-like performances, incantation-like scripts, and technocatharsis. The internet shall be used as a just curator for the dramatic craft, carefully avoiding the commodification of human life and sorrows.

We reject any scenario other than infiltrating Eurocentric art infrastructures and institutions with our dramatic craft. We believe it's the only way the notion of theatre can fulfill its true meaning in this world.

We, the marginals, minoritarians of all kinds, own the future of theatre too. We are here to claim it.